

**STATEMENT OF THE
HONORABLE JOHN J. DUNCAN, JR.
HEARING ON
H.R. 4650, THE NATIONAL LEVEE
SAFETY PROGRAM ACT OF 2005**

I would like to welcome everyone to our hearing today on H.R. 4650, “the National Levee Safety Program Act of 2005.”

I was very pleased that prior to the end of the 1st Session of the 109th Congress, Subcommittee Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson, Chairman Don Young, Ranking Member Jim Oberstar, and I introduced H.R. 4650, the “National Levee Safety Program Act of 2005.”

We have seen in the Gulf Region what can happen when hurricane and flood protection infrastructure is inadequate or fails to perform.

Yet more Americans are moving to coastal areas where the risk of hurricanes and floods is greatest.

In the South Atlantic region, the coastal population grew 51 percent from 1980 to 2000 and it is expected to increase another 13 percent by 2008.

Along the Gulf of Mexico, the population has increased 38 percent from 1980 to 2000 and is projected to grow an additional 12 percent by 2008.

We do not know where the next hurricane or flood will hit. But we do know that many of our major cities, including parts of Washington, DC, have a greater probability of flooding than did New Orleans. For example, the city of Sacramento, California has almost twice as many people as New Orleans, yet it has less flood protection than any other major city in America. Cities like Houston, St. Louis, and Miami also are at risk. We cannot treat citizens of these cities differently unless we have a policy reason that we can explain and justify to our constituents.

As we have learned from recent levee failures, our infrastructure is aging. What we know about the existence and condition of these other levees we often learn when one fails or is overwhelmed by a flood event. For instance, the State of California recently declared a state of emergency in the Central Valley in anticipation of the failure of 24 levees. According to the State of California, it would cost \$5 billion to make critical delta levees, but not all delta levees, stronger in the face of flood and seismic events in the Central Valley.

In the past this Committee has taken steps to ensure that the nation’s flood damage reduction infrastructure is properly inventoried, inspected, and assessed.

In 1986 the Congress authorized “the National Dam Safety Program Act” to conduct an inventory and assessments of all dams nationwide. This has been a successful program and we have modeled “the National Levee Safety Program Act” after that law.

The National Inventory of Dams shows that 45 percent of all Federal dams are at least 50 years old; and that 80 percent of them are at least 30 years old.

We know less about the status and capabilities of our levees. There has never been a national inventory of levees. Little is known about the current condition of both federal and non-federal levees, including whether these levees were designed to meet current conditions, or whether they have been properly maintained by the non-federal interest.

Over the decades, levees have been built by different entities, at different times, and to different standards. They have been linked together to provide a protective system, but with such a mixture of conditions, the true level of protection may be in doubt.

Over time, development has taken place behind some of these levees so that much more may be at risk in terms of lives and economic resources.

There is so much that we do not know about the levees in American that we cannot be sure how safe our cities and towns really are. We need more information.

That is why we have introduced the “National Levee Safety Program Act”, to get an inventory of levees in the United States and work with the States to encourage them to develop their own levee safety programs.

We have worked closely with members on both sides of the aisle and the various groups to advance the goal of improving the infrastructure in the most cost effective manner. We have received favorable feedback from diverse parties. The National Levee Safety Program Act embraces innovative solutions for the inventory and subsequent assessments of these structures.

H.R. 4650 includes provisions for the Army Corps of Engineers to conduct an inventory, inspections, and assessments of all levees nationwide. The legislation establishes an Interagency Committee on Levee Safety to create standards for federal levees, and creates a National Levee Safety Review Board made up of Federal, State, local, and private officials to monitor levee safety and implementation of State levee safety programs. The bill also provides incentives for States and localities to participate in the program.

In order to make the best investment of taxpayer dollars, we need to do an inventory, an inspection, and an assessment of levees across the United States. We need to know what they are protecting and what is the level of risk associated with these levees. This should help us prioritize future spending on flood protection.

I hope that our witnesses today will help us understand the current condition of our hurricane and flood protection infrastructure and what it should look like in the future. I hope to hear some suggestions on how this good legislation can be made better. I look forward to an educational and enlightening hearing.